

Home-Cured Olives

"There's nothing scientific about it," says author Angelo Garro as he adds hot peppers and garlic to a barrel of his olives.

An Italian living in San Francisco makes his own with just a few simple ingredients and a little help from his friends

BY ANGELO GARRO



Sorting the olives is the first step. Young, hard green olives go into one bucket; others that are larger and speckled with red go into another; and plump, fully mature black olives go into a bucket of their own.

When I was growing up in Sicily, my family rarely went to the market for food. We grew our own vegetables, made our own wine, and every fall we gathered in my grandmother's kitchen to cure olives. When you grow up with these traditions, they stay with you, and you carry them with you wherever you go. I live in California now and earn my living as an ironsmith, but I still love to prepare the kind of food that I ate as a boy in Italy. I gather mushrooms from the forest, and make fritters from wild fennel that grows alongside the road; I make sausage from boars that I hunt, and wine from local grapes, and on my table there are always olives cured the way my grandmother taught me.

AN OLIVE-CURING PARTY

Every year, usually at the beginning of December, my friends and I spend a weekend curing olives. For a shared harvest, we pick, sort, crack, pierce, and cure sometimes as much as 600 pounds of olives. In fact, I've turned olive-making into an annual party. Not many of my friends in San Francisco grew up with the food traditions that I did, and I have fun introducing them to the things I learned from my grandmother. On Saturday, we drive to a friend's farm near Sacramento and pick olives all day. We always bring along a picnic to eat in the olive grove. The next day, back at my forge in the city, everyone helps sort olives and prepare them for curing. When the work is done, we feast. The point is simply to be

OLIVES AT VARIOUS STAGES OF MATURITY



Green olives



Red, speckled olives



Black olives

together, to cook, and to have fun. Of course everyone shows up again when the olives are finished curing to claim their share.

At this time of the year, there are olives at every stage of ripeness on the trees—tiny, hard green ones, others just beginning to color and speckled with red, as well as plump, fully mature black olives. Some of the olives take months to cure, but others are ready to eat in just a few weeks.

Before the olives can be cured they must be sorted. We make three piles. The tiny green olives go into one; any olive that shows the slightest bit of color goes into another, and the olives that are completely black go into a third.

Each type of olive requires a different cure. The green ones are cracked and then soaked in fresh water to leach out their bitterness. The colored olives are cured in brine, and the fully mature black olives are salt-cured.

Some people use lye to cure olives, but I don't like the taste. They can wash and wash and wash the olives, but I always taste the lye. Even though it can be used safely, lye is still a poison, and it's hard to feel comfortable putting it in your food. There's no reason to use it. I've cured olives all my life with only water, salt, and seasonings.

GREEN OLIVES ARE CURED IN FRESH WATER

When you have olives and you love olives, you cannot wait to have olives to eat. So I start every olive season by making *olive nueva*, new olives. Made with the smallest and greenest of olives and cured in fresh water, these are ready to eat in just five to six weeks and help satisfy my craving for olives while I wait for the others to cure.

Green olives are rock hard, so to help them release their bitter juices, I smash each one with a rock. (Wear an apron or old clothes when you do this, as you'll be covered with olive oil.) When all the olives



No fancy equipment required. Crush the green olives with a rock, but be sure to cover up: you'll be showered with fresh-pressed extra-virgin olive oil.

are cracked, I put them in plastic buckets and cover them with cold water. Every day, I drain the olives and cover them with fresh water. As the olives soak, their bitterness is leached out into the water.

Start tasting the olives after they've soaked for four weeks. If they're still too bitter, leave the olives, changing the water every day, and taste again a week later. When the olives are no longer bitter, spread them out on a tablecloth and leave them overnight in a warm kitchen to dry. The next day, put the olives in a big bowl with garlic and mint

Where to find olives if you don't have a tree BY MAGGIE BLYTH KLEIN

The best source for fresh olives is an olive tree. Olives you pick yourself are less likely to be bruised, and you'll be assured that they're absolutely fresh when you start to cure them. A current favorite with landscape designers, olive trees aren't as hard to find as you might think. Anywhere winters are mild, olive trees thrive, provided there are no prolonged severe freezes. And because olives create an oil slick when they drop to the ground, many olive tree owners are happy to let you help yourself to their olives—just be sure

to ask first. In moderate climates, start looking for suitably "ripe" green olives in October, in areas with long, very hot summers, olives will be ready for curing in late September. As the months progress, olives available for curing will go from green to red to black, the black being available as late as January.

Happily, olives are no longer a rarity at produce markets, either. Toward the end of September, when the oil content of the olive is sufficiently high, California olive growers begin shipping their crop to terminal

markets in Montreal, Toronto, Detroit, Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, Denver, and Oakland. From there, the olives are distributed to local produce wholesale markets, where independent grocers and, to a small extent, supermarkets can buy them. Specialty markets and independent grocery stores, particularly those in Italian, Portuguese, Greek, or Spanish neighborhoods, are good places to look.

If you can find them, buy Manzanillo olives. They have a high flesh-to-pit ratio and tend to cure evenly.

Unfortunately, 85% of the fresh olives available from California are the largest commonly grown variety—the Sevillano. These huge olives have a low oil content and less flavor than other varieties, but are nevertheless suitable for curing. Whatever olives you use, be sure they're free of cuts, bruises, and dryness.

Maggie Blyth Klein, a co-owner of Oliveto Restaurant in Oakland, California, is the author of *The Feast of the Olive* (Chronicle Books, 1994).



Plump black olives are packed into tall Chinese laundry baskets between layers of rock salt. In five weeks, they'll be shriveled, intensely flavored, and ready to eat.

chopped very fine, olive oil, vinegar, and salt to taste. Use two parts olive oil and one part vinegar. The amounts for the other seasonings are strictly to taste. Cover the bowl and let the olives steep, stirring occasionally, for two to three days. Now the olives are ready to eat. Transfer them to large glass jars and top with a layer of olive oil to preserve them. These green olives should be stored in the refrigerator, but always bring them to room temperature before eating. Don't keep them for more than two months.

A SPICY BRINE FOR "RED" OLIVES

As the olives begin to mature, their color slowly changes from green to black. At this in-between stage the olives are still partly green, speckled with red, and starting to grow plump. I cure these olives in a brine, a process that in Italy we call *olive a la salmorina*.

These olives soak for about six months in a mixture of salted water and herbs. I start by filling a barrel with the olives. To measure the salt, I fill a bucket with water and drop in a whole fresh raw egg. The egg immediately sinks to the bottom, but as I add salt, it starts to float. I add salt until the egg bobs on the surface. Now the water is salty enough to cure the olives. I take out the egg and pour the water into the barrel.

I add fresh hot chiles to the barrel, branches of wild fennel (you can use fennel seeds or the tops of fennel bulbs), and whole heads of garlic. Again, there is no right amount to use, just add the seasonings to taste.

After four months or so I change the water. There's nothing scientific about it; I just look at the calendar and realize that three, maybe four months have passed. I drain the water, leave the seasonings, and repeat the process with fresh water and salt.

The olives cure for another month. Then I drain them again, add fresh brine, and repeat the process one more time. At the end of six months, I drain the olives, but this time I cover them with water that's only slightly salty. These olives can be packed in jars with their brine and seasonings and stored at room temperature. They last as long as a year and a half.

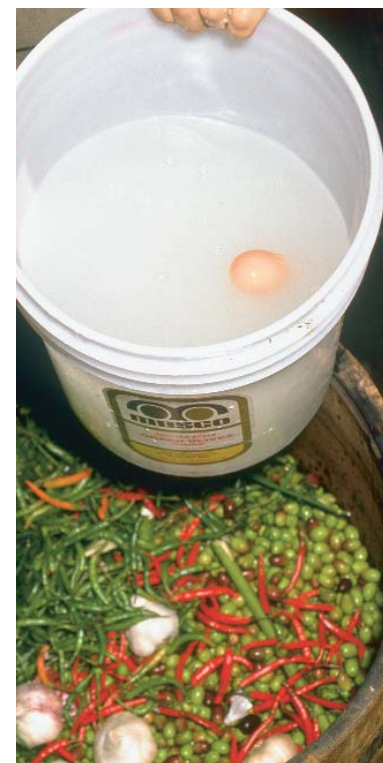
A SALT CURE FOR BLACK OLIVES

Black olives are pierced with a fork before they're salted so that their bitter juices can run out. I pack the olives in tall Chinese laundry baskets between layers of rock salt; any tall wicker basket will do. Start with a thick layer of salt on the bottom of the basket, top with a two- to three-inch layer of olives, more salt—two or three generous handfuls—and more olives, repeating until the basket is full. Then top it off with a thick layer of salt. Cover the basket with a board and weight it down with a stone. Be sure to set the basket over a container to catch the juice that drains from the olives. Every week turn the olives and add more salt to replace what melts and runs out with the juice from the olives. You may need to add more salt occasionally to prevent mold from developing. After five weeks, rinse all the salt from the olives and dry them well.

To season the olives, gently heat about a cup of olive oil in a large frying pan. Add thin slivers of orange peel, a few squeezes of fresh orange juice, some red pepper flakes, a few crushed cloves of garlic, about

¼ cup of red-wine vinegar, and a couple of tablespoons of fennel seeds. Add the olives in batches, toss well, and heat until they are warmed through. Pour the olives into jars and cover with olive oil. Be sure the orange peel is completely submerged; it will spoil if exposed to air. These olives should be stored in the refrigerator but brought to room temperature before serving. If you keep them covered with olive oil, they will keep for two years.

The fires at Angelo Garro's Renaissance Forge are as likely to be boiling a pot of water for pasta as they are welding and shaping iron into art. ♦



Measure salt egg-xactly. A fresh egg will float in brine that's sufficiently salted.